

Roughing it on Beacon Hill

STATEHOUSE ROUNDUP

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A recap and analysis of the week in state government.

More than two centuries of House speakers peer gravely down from Sal DiMasi's office walls, frowning less, perhaps, in disapproval of their current incarnation's performance than of his inner sanctum's condition.

"Finneran left me this rug," DiMasi joked to a pair of surprised reporters on a Tuesday evening tour, pointing at carpeting stained with water and other things. The drapes are sooted, the couch is pitted, the chairs unsturdy, and, while the personal bathroom is nice, "The sewer backs up."

Considering one reporter's suggestion that the speaker spend a few bucks and fix the place up, as the drumbeat around the building grows louder for what will likely be a costly refurbishing of the whole capitol, DiMasi replied, "I can't. You guys'll write about it."

Intended or not, DiMasi's tour, evidently impromptu, served as a clear reminder of troubles Gov. Deval Patrick encountered earlier this year after paying up for his own office fixings, ugliness the governor hopes is behind him.

The budget deliberations DiMasi managed this week provided another repudiation of Patrick. Earmark reform?

Not this year.

Ignoring his revenue-side proposals by eschewing any correlative amendments, members also pranced past Patrick's attempt to reduce what some administration officials call porcine spending; one Patrick line item of 48 words ballooned into a 997-word

amendment rich with proper nouns and district-gratifying dollar signs.

Not all reps were pleased with the proceedings. The practice of wedging huge numbers of proposals into single amendments, explained in cursory floor remarks by members of leadership and greeted with lopsided approval, prompted one House veteran to grumble about the process, early in the week, "This is the worst I've ever seen."

By Thursday, the House had beefed up its \$26.7 billion plan with \$135 million more, with the bottom line of additions expected to top \$170 million. What fun would a faux debate over a balanced budget be if there weren't some walking-around money to jingle? The budget committee decided the best way to rebalance the budget would be to borrow another \$175 million from state reserves, bringing the total planned withdrawal to \$325 million.

The budget provided backdrop for the other DiMasi-Patrick skirmishes: over 140 lawmakers signing onto an effort to save Department of Mental Retardation Commissioner Gerry Morrissey's job; the speaker's muscular push to discard Patrick's Legislature-approved changes to the energy bureaucracy; and the House's furtive, late-night snub of the governor's grab for control of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination.

DiMasi's multi-act power play in the face of the still-popular new governor remains Topic A on the Hill. To what end, and how much more?

DiMasi adorned the stage of budget week with calculated jabs at Patrick in a variety of forums. The speaker had been uncommonly available for television

appearances, opining last week that Patrick "didn't understand what we do." Aside from a perhaps-unintentional defense of his friends in the news media against Patrick's post-election charge that some of them "didn't get it," the speaker was making clear to his own members they should remain just that: his.

By the end of the week, the canny grasp of internal and media affairs DiMasi had exhibited earlier seemed to fray a bit, and he found himself confronting another dynamic that has plagued legislative leaders who put their dukes up against their governors: The governor's bully pulpit is taller, and Cabinet secretaries don't fuss as much as state reps whose remarks don't materialize.

Aspray of unfavorable coverage dented the speaker. Perhaps emboldened by the at-times farcical nature of the week, members began blurring process and recess, extracurricular activities that included a cigar party, mariachi band, and at least one lewd comment about a colleague's physical traits shouted from the back bench that drew guffaws around the chamber.

The expectedly tranquil final steps of the process turned thorny, a setback that pushed the grumpy House into a Friday session. And if Patrick by then still didn't understand what the exactly the Legislature does, he could take comfort in the knowledge that, once again, he was in the majority.

House builds on \$26.8B House Appropriations Bill — Building on its \$26.713 billion budget proposal, the House this week added \$135 million through earmark-rich amendments by Friday afternoon (a number expected to grow to roughly \$171 million), adopted Gov. Deval Patrick's initiative to

boost after-school programs, and added a new line item for anti-gang grants. The spending addition breakdowns by category, according to House leadership aides, included:—

DMR/DMH/Disabilities: \$3M — Veterans/Health & Human Services/DPH: \$22.4M — DTA/Social Services: \$2.3M — Early Ed/Ed/Higher Ed/Local Aid: \$25.8M — Judiciary/Public Safety: \$35.1M — State Administration/State Finance/Constitutional Offices: \$ 5 . 7 M — Transportation/Housing: \$2.2M — Elder Affairs/Medicaid: \$38.7M

Legislature Joins Climate Change Parade — "Energy" is this session's policy watchword, and branching from it are a whole slew of other policy and structural implications. The sexiest side issue, though, is climate change, and that came front and center Monday, when Sen. Marc Pacheco, a disciple of former Vice President Al Gore on the issue, hosted US Rep. Edward Markey at a hearing on the issue. Both officials head committees dedicated to global warming, and were in agreement that the issue is a signature one of the age. The committee is expected to begin a statewide series of hearings on transportation policy, green buildings, utilities and energy, the state of the oceans, renewable energy technology, public health and the economy. With the most contentious single roll call this week on House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi's effort to reverse Gov. Deval Patrick's restructuring of the energy bureaucracy, and yet more environment-friendly news coming out of the governor's office, doubters of whether energy was the new health care had their answer.

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